

Ms. Catherine Ashton,
High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy,
Council of the European Union

17 July 2010,

Dear Ms. Catherine Ashton,

I welcome you and your second visit to the Gaza Strip. I have been following your positions regarding the illegal Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip with much admiration.

My name is Fatma Al-Sharif and I am a human rights lawyer at Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights in Gaza. I am writing to you inform you and the European Union that I have been banned from exiting the Gaza Strip and entering the West Bank to stay there while I undertake my studies in the West Bank. I have been accepted onto a MA course in Human Rights and Democracy at Birzeit University in Ramallah, the West Bank.

I applied for a permit from the Israeli authorities and my request was rejected on the grounds that students do not fall under the category of people allowed to travel from the Gaza Strip through Erez Crossing. As a result, I am not allowed to access and enjoy my right to education, even in my own country. As my application demonstrated, I am respected lawyer who has spent the last few years working in a Palestinian human rights organization. I am most certainly not a security threat to Israel.

On 26 May 2010, Birzeit University informed me that I had been accepted onto their MA program, but I must finalise my registration in person and sit an English exam by the 15 July 2010. This date has now passed and I have missed the opportunity to complete my registration and take the English exam. However, it is still exceptionally possible, if I am allowed to leave now, that there is still time for me to register and begin my studies, which start on 15 August 2010.

On 7 June 2010, I went to the coordination office in the Civil Affairs Department in Gaza City to apply for the permission to leave Gaza. The Palestinian staff informed me that they could not accept my application as students' applications cannot be conveyed to the Israeli authorities. It is the Israeli authorities that determine and decide the criteria and category of persons who are eligible to seek such permission. They told me that since 2000 the Israeli authorities have rejected all applications from Gazan students who wish to study in the West Bank.

My organization, Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights, contacted Gisha, the Center for Freedom of Movement, which is an Israeli human rights organization, and asked Gisha to represent me. Gisha wrote a letter to Israeli District Coordination Office (DCO) and requested clearance for me to exit the Gaza Strip and enter and stay in the West Bank. On 23 June 2010, Gisha received a letter from this DCO, informing them that my request had

been rejected because I did not qualify as a humanitarian case. On 1 July 2010, Gisha filed an appeal to the Israeli High Court (4906/10) to complain about the rejection of my application. In its response to the appeal, the Israeli government announced that there was no change in its policy concerning the movement of individuals from the Gaza Strip; the same policy that categorically bans Gazan students from the West Bank. On 7 July 2010, the Israeli High Court rejected the petition adopting the Israeli government's position.

I am appealing to you to use all the power and leverage you have to intervene in this situation. This is the same situation for thousands of Palestinian students who have been longing to benefit from the high quality of education available within their own country; education that is greatly needed for the development of the Gaza Strip and a future Palestine.

I and my organization would appreciate your intervention. We hope we can meet you during your visit to Gaza and inform you of the details in person.

Yours sincerely,

Fatma Al Sharif